

San Luis Rey Downs Fire Rallies Racing Community

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The Lilac Fire that tore across North County killed at least 46 horses at San Luis Rey Downs, transforming a place brimming with life into one devastated by death.

What did San Luis Rey endure in those fateful hours on Dec. 7 as the fire ambushed stalls holding about 450 horses? Animal hide was discovered on an aluminum gate along the track's inside rail — far from the flames — a jarring sign of the chaos that swirled.

Outside of Barn E, the car of trainer Martine Bellocq was gutted by flames so white-hot that the wheel rims melted into molten puddles as its driver rushed to save as many horses as possible. Bellocq suffered second- and third-degree burns over 50 percent of her body.

Near Barn L, someone jumped from a feed truck to fight the fire before the vehicle was engulfed along an open roadway — reduced to nothing more than frame and axles.

Trainer Peter Miller, who had been working at Los Alamitos, was forced to wait outside San Luis Rey for an hour as police locked down the area. When he finally navigated his way onto the still-burning property, he was stunned by the scene.

“It was like a nightmare,” said Miller, an Encinitas resident who had more than 75 horses stabled at the facility. “Like a living nightmare. Words can’t describe seeing the horses in their stalls. The smoke and the fire were still going. It was surreal.

“It was worse than I ever could have imagined. Much worse.”

The chilling setting horrified Leandro Mora, too. The assistant to trainer Doug O’Neill, who molded Kentucky Derby winners Nyquist and I’ll Have Another, held onto a pair of horses as he coughed and weighed it all through stinging eyes.

“Right then, two horses ran by,” said Mora, a 40-year veteran who paused at the memory. “They were burned from end to end, the hair was gone and they were screaming. That’s the moment when I made the decision to let our horses go.

“That’s going to be in my brain the rest of my life. That’s ugly. Ugly stuff.”

Kevin Habell, San Luis Rey’s general manager, pulled a small, stuffed horse with a handwritten note pinned to it from the back of his truck while touring the charred site Thursday. Workers said the gift was dropped at the gate of the 240-acre facility by a young girl.

May these sweet angels run free around God's track

So sorry for your loss

Our thoughts and prayers are with you all

Your Bonsall neighbors

"Oh man, I'm going to cry again," Habell whispered.

The fire burned out. The human spirit? Hardly.

Full Article and

photos: <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sports/columnists/bryce-miller/sd-sp-miller-san-luis-rey-fire-20171217-story.html>

San Luis Rey Downs is a 500-stall training facility that became vital to the Southern California horse racing industry after Hollywood Park closed. The center is used for thoroughbreds who are taking a break from racing, and some trainers use it to board their horses and transport them to Del Mar, Santa Anita and Los Alamitos for races.

The Lilac Fire

The Lilac fire witnessed the largest squadron of aerial firefighting assets in San Diego County's history. Coming from numerous agencies, the aircraft worked closely with ground forces to turn the tide in the fire's first 18 hours. By 4 a.m., they had made a combined total of 145 drops, dropping about 54,000 gallons. And by sunrise, thanks to falling winds and the efforts of firefighters on the ground and aloft, the fire's head had been pinched.

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